

Effective Conversations for Decision Making: Improving Behavior or Changing Structure?

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We rely on effective conversations, particularly those conversations we call “meetings¹,” to build understanding, alignment, decisions and commitment to action. Much of the time, however, we attend meetings that have not been designed for productive conversations that support such outcomes. Yes, the date and location have been set and checked against the intended participants’ availability. There is a stated agenda or topic for the meeting. When people arrive at the meeting, there may be some review of ground rules. We may follow “Robert’s Rules of Order,” listen to carefully prepared presentations, or have a trained facilitator present to help. Still, the meeting does not seem to support effective conversation and decision making.

Most prescriptions for better meetings emphasize changing the behavior of participants. But this is very hard to do, as behaviors are the natural result of experience with past meetings and particular structures. By “structures” I mean the physical and procedural characteristics of a meeting that affect the way we talk with one another. For example, a microphone and a podium provide a structure for the interaction between speaker and participants. So too does seating arrangements, or who keeps the notes. These structures reflect different assumptions about how to have an “effective” discussion which in turn reinforce particular behaviors. However, a change in structures can suspend those old assumptions and create the opportunity for different behavior, different conversations and more efficient decision-making. This paper presents a way to improve the effectiveness of conversations and decision making in meetings by changing meeting structures based upon different assumptions about what makes for an effective meeting.

Recognizing Assumptions

There are two different sets of assumptions that in turn support two different types of meeting experience. Some of these assumptions are explicit, and some are only observable through the structures and behaviors they support. Some assumptions may appear so obvious that it is hard to think about how things could be any different. One set of these assumptions I call “directed” since they reflect the view that the most effective meetings are those that are well directed. A second set of assumptions I call “laissez-faire” as they support a much more casual approach to meetings. Under these assumptions, a meeting is more like a casual conversation among friends.

¹ A meeting is essentially a planned conversation and this paper focuses on such occasions as opposed to the more unpredictable interactions that occur in hallways and over the phone.

Some brief examples of the assumptions underlying directed and laissez-faire approaches may help you recognize these two types of meetings. Directed assumptions affect many aspects of meetings, including the following:

- **Use of agenda and time:** Meetings should use time efficiently and follow an agenda.
- **Participation:** Participant roles in the meeting reflect levels of responsibility and authority. For example, it is natural for the person with greatest responsibility and authority to run the meeting and sit at the head of the table.
- **Discussion and decision making:** Meetings should resolve key issues there and then. It is necessary, if unfortunate, that we have to spend much of our time and energy in meetings trying to resolve areas of disagreement since this is our opportunity to convince others. We assume that those areas where we are in agreement will pretty much take care of themselves without much discussion. The final decision is either up to the senior leader or to majority vote.
- **Outcomes:** Meetings should produce outcomes that are implemented. Those present will communicate the meeting outcomes to others who are affected by or responsible for some aspect of those decisions.

Meetings conducted under directed assumptions can be efficient. However, discussions can be divisive as people compete to “win” their points. Some participants may withdraw from active discussion. Such meetings may lead to some agreement on meeting outcomes, but create little commitment to act on those outcomes.

Turning now to the laissez-faire approach to meetings, examples of its underlying assumptions can be identified and compared to directed meeting assumptions across these same four categories.

- **Use of agenda and time:** Meeting length is determined by the time available, or maybe by interest in the topic. Agendas evolve. Meetings naturally fill the time available.
- **Participation:** We assume that participants are all reasonable, well-intentioned people, who know how to have a conversation about what needs to be decided. Conversations will naturally lead to some back and forth between a few people while others sit back. Certain difficult topics should remain unspoken in a group setting.
- **Discussion and decision making:** Conversation will focus on unresolved issues since if we can resolve these few areas of difference, everything else will fall into place. Decisions are usually reached by a presumption of consensus (as when we assume

closure by saying “if no one has an objection...”) but we will vote if we get stuck.

- **Outcomes:** Being better informed as a result of this conversation, participants will naturally know what to do next.

I have found myself in meetings based on laissez-faire assumptions in meetings among peers, or when the leader is not clear about his/her own intentions for meeting outcomes. Decision making can be excruciating and time-consuming. Participants are often unclear about the purpose of the meeting. The meeting may end unceremoniously with people wondering, “What did we decide?”

Adopting an Alternate Set of Assumptions

In my experience, most meetings fall under either directed or laissez-faire assumptions. There is, however, a third set of assumptions that I call “engagement” as these assumptions emphasize the importance of engaging participants in the discussion to use everyone’s input to build wise decisions and commitment to action.

The following are some of the assumptions of an engagement approach:²

- **Use of agenda and time:** There must be a clear task for the group to do together so that everyone knows how to contribute to the discussion and decisions. The agenda should allocate time to specific topics to be decided. Reports and presentations should be kept to a minimum during the meeting to allow more time for people to talk with one another.
- **Participation:** Complete understanding of an issue requires input from everyone with a stake in the issue. There should be a variety of opportunities for speaking and listening. Everyone in the meeting should have a genuine opportunity to contribute to decision making.
- **Discussion and decision making:** Decisions should be reached through consensus, consent, or compromise. Voting should be used only as a last resort, if legally required, or for quick decisions on trivial items (e.g., “who wants pizza for lunch?”)
- **Outcomes:** Participants should leave the meeting committed to following up on its conclusions.

Meetings which emphasize the engagement of participants frequently have many small group conversations to give everyone a chance to speak. Flip charts are used to capture the progress of discussion so that everyone can see the notes as they emerge. People develop action plans to follow-up on conclusions.

² For ease of reference, all three sets of meeting assumptions are compared in one table at the end of this paper.

The most common examples of meetings based on engagement assumptions have been certain large group meetings. A number of distinct models for large group meetings have been developed over the last 25 years to address particular situations (e.g., Future Search, World Café, Whole Scale, Open Space).³ All of these meeting approaches emphasize engaging people in sharing their views to build new understanding and reach decisions together. These meetings are based on a different set of assumptions than either the directed or laissez-faire approaches and they produce very different results. Applying these same assumptions to everyday meetings enables meeting leaders to structure more effective discussions and decision making.

Improving Behavior or Changing Structure

The usual prescriptions for improving meeting discussions focus on improving the way we behave. By “behavior” I mean attempts to adopt meeting norms, follow practices of good listening, balance advocacy and inquiry, and follow similar prescriptions for behaviors which support efficient and effective discussion and decision making. Unfortunately, few of us are very good at adopting and maintaining these behaviors, particularly when in heated discussions.

Expecting participants to behave in ways that produce better conversations and decisions, may run counter to more natural behaviors given the structure and assumptions of the meeting. For example, asking people to listen carefully and avoid premature judgment runs counter to a meeting operating under directed assumptions in which voting or hierarchy will ultimately determine the decision. In such a situation, advocating your own view is natural if you don’t want to “lose.” In the same way, asking people to stay on point and avoid side conversations can be difficult in a laissez-fair meeting where the structure seems to imply a less focused, more wide-ranging exchange.

Engagement assumptions, however, support a different structure and this makes different behaviors more natural. To see the difference structure can make, picture two approaches to the same meeting.

First consider how this meeting would look as conducted under directed assumptions. As you arrive, you sit in your usual seat along a rectangular table. People sit next to people they know. At the head of the table sits the senior manager. The meeting is led by the manager following a general list of topics as an agenda and some overall duration assigned to the meeting. One key issue consumes the time available as participants have some unresolved differences around how to proceed. The discussion is dominated by those who tend to be the most outspoken members of the group. Others seem to withdraw from the

³ See Bunker and Alban, *Large Group Interventions*, Jossey Bass, 1997, and Bunker and Alban, *The Handbook of Large Group Methods*, Jossey-Bass, 2006, and Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, *Future Search*, Berrett-Kohler, 2000, for more on the evolution of such methods.

debate. Finally, the senior manager proposes which way to go and quickly checks to see if anyone will disagree with the conclusion before closing the meeting. After the meeting, you hear from some participants that they are OK with the decision and just want to move forward, but others are feeling disconnected from the group's decision. Most are frustrated by what they feel was an unproductive use of their time.

Does this sound familiar? The manager was following many of the assumptions and structures of a directed approach, and the participants were following along unconsciously: in how they sat, how time was used, how they interacted with the discussion and each other, and in how a decision was reached.

Now picture this same meeting as planned and conducted using structures that reflect engagement assumptions. As you arrive you find a round table with a flip chart on one side. In addition to the usual participants, there are people from elsewhere in the organization who are affected by the main topic under discussion. The meeting begins with the senior manager asking participants to share responsibilities for time keeping, and note taking. As part of introductions, each person gets a chance to speak briefly on what's on his/her mind as they arrive today. The manager then reviews the agenda and clarifies the work to be accomplished in the meeting along with how final decisions will be reached. There is a brief presentation of the key topic after which people are asked to discuss their views in pairs and trios for a few minutes. As discussion proceeds, each person has an opportunity to share his/her own point of view. People appear able to listen to each other's views and differences are acknowledged. Then the entire group hears the outcomes of the small group discussions. Several people offer comments to integrate different views. The progress of the discussion is recorded on the flip chart and all notes are kept in view of the group. At one point the timekeeper notes the remaining time and the group negotiates how to complete the meeting's work in the time available. The manager is involved in the discussion as a participant. When time comes to reach a decision, someone proposes a conclusion and the manager asks each participant, in turn, to indicate their consent or to offer a modification. After some discussion, there is a second round to check again for each person's consent to the decision.⁴ As the meeting ends, people appear energized and ready to move forward.

In this second example, the manager has set up a number of structural conditions to enable different behavior. These include inviting new participants, arranging for a different table, identifying roles, providing an opportunity for everyone present to speak from the beginning, using small conversation groups before the whole group conversation, and giving everyone a chance to contribute to

⁴ "Consent" here means that the individual has no fundamental disagreement with the conclusion. (See J. Buck and S. Villines, *We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy*, Sociocracy.info, 2007 for more on this approach. This is one of six approaches that can be used to structure decisions in a meeting based on engagement assumptions.

the decision. As a result, participants are naturally engaged and find their contributions respected. Commitment to meeting outcomes is likely to be high.

Structures for Meetings Based on Engagement

I have spent a number of years studying and working with the structures common to large group meetings, meetings whose assumptions are based on engagement, to identify which structures can be most readily adopted by leaders and managers in a wide variety of everyday settings. I have tested these structures in various settings with a range of leaders. Overall, I have identified 12 main structural elements and a variety of supporting tools to put these structures in place. The first six structural elements all focus on how the meeting is planned. There are four elements for conducting the meeting, and two for achieving results. An emphasis is placed on structures for planning the meeting since a well-planned meeting is prepared from the start to engage participants more successfully and the discussion can almost run itself. A brief description of each of these structural elements follows.

Planning the Meeting

1) Define an Actionable Purpose: A group meets together most effectively when the intended purpose is clear to all and represents an effort to which all can contribute, so define the task of the meeting clearly in terms of its expected outcome(s) in a way that shows what all need to contribute.

Note: This goes beyond the traditional concept of an agenda to focus on specifying the expected outcome of any main discussion point.

2) Select Different Participants: Adding a few participants with different perspectives or responsibilities relative to the subject of discussion can produce more creative, complete and easily implemented outcomes.

Note: This differs from traditional meetings held only with direct reports or the “usual suspects” by highlighting the importance of including different voices.

3) Plan for Meeting Size and Differences in Power and Affiliation:

Engaging all participants requires that certain steps be taken in planning the meeting so that participants will be able to share their views across differences in age, authority, status, perspective, or allegiance.

4) Decide How to Decide: Engaging everyone in the discussion means it is important to be clear, up front, about how decisions will be reached as a result of the discussion. There are six basic ways in which to engage others in a decision making (only one of which involves voting):

Consensus, Consent, Compromise, Counting Votes, Deciding with Input, and Decide and Inform.

5) Design for Time: Planning for an effective use of time when engaging meeting participants begins by challenging the assumption that a meeting is necessarily a whole group discussion proceeding at a given pace. Various tools can help structure the time available to enable the whole group to achieve the meeting purpose in a specified amount of time, for example, using concurrent small group discussions and reports back to the whole group.

6) Prepare the Setting: Certain physical settings are more naturally conducive to better communication and collaboration. Here is where “structure” takes a visible form beginning with the shape of the table (or use of a table at all), seating arrangements, information displays and similar elements.

Conducting the Meeting

7) Share Responsibility: Participants can share responsibilities with the leader for managing certain aspects of meeting activities. Sharing responsibilities also builds a sense of mutual responsibility for meeting process and outcomes.

8) Talk and Listen Together: The exchange of ideas can be designed with the help of simple structural tools to help participants share their thoughts and hear the thoughts of others as they build new understanding and agreements without having to remember *how* to behave.

9) Manage Time: Since time is one of the most critical resources in a meeting, it often needs to be actively managed, evaluated or re-allocated during the course of the meeting. Various tools (e.g., sharing responsibilities in the meeting and a process I call 1-2-All) can help the leader manage time appropriately.

10) Acknowledge Conflict: Acknowledging a conflict can de-escalate a situation and help people feel “heard” and respected. When you respect differences and minimize the need to defend positions, disagreements can become an opportunity for building greater understanding, wiser conclusions and more alignment. Certain tools for structuring your discussions can make this easier to accomplish.

Achieving Results

11) Build Decisions: A step-by-step approach to building decisions can be used to respect different points of view and align participants around a common set of agreements.

12) Follow-Up: Meeting outcomes can be implemented more effectively and consistently when people have an opportunity to plan their actions

and reflect on subsequent results in an appropriately planned follow-up conversation.

Each of these twelve structural elements has accompanying tools designed for use in different settings. For example, designing a meeting to engage various numbers of participants can be supported by using a tool called “Principle of 8.” This tool helps the leader plan to work with larger groups based on the reality that *eight* is the maximum number of participants who can hold one, sustained conversation without a lot of facilitation. If there are more than eight participants, the leader can ask participants to discuss key points in groups of 2-4 and report back to the whole group. Another tool to help people talk and listen together is the “Three Reaction Questions.” This tool provides a discussion structure to support a balanced reaction to a proposal or topic from the whole group. You first ask participants to talk with each other in small groups to answer the questions below, and then take reports from each small group, one question at a time:

1. What do you like about [the proposal]?
2. Where do you need more information?
3. Where do you have concerns?

In this way, each individual can test their initial reactions in a small group setting (so they do not have to defend a position in front of the whole group), and the entire group hears first what they like about the proposal before they hear about questions and concerns. Everyone gets to speak and to listen to one another, but no one has to remember to practice particular “good” behaviors.

Currently, there are a total of 30 tools that can be selected and used in various combinations to build the structure of an effective, efficient and engaging meeting. Additional tools continue to be developed and tested with leaders in different settings. Taken together, this set of guidelines and tools supports what I refer to as “High Engagement Meetings.”

Examples of High Engagement Meetings

I offer three short examples as a way to see how the practices of High Engagement Meetings can work in widely different settings.

- A difficult leadership transition resulted in a fractured, dispirited management team which now had to take on greater responsibility for achieving the business goals. The leader planned a half-day meeting in which participants first shared personal stories of best practice and views of the current state before confirming their shared vision for their performance at its best. They then made action plans for achieving specific aspects of the vision and built a base for frank exchange of progress and learning. Within three months they achieved important improvements as a business and in their work as a team.

- A church board wanted to gain the congregation's support for a controversial reorganization of staff roles and responsibilities. In a one-hour meeting, the board presented their proposal and then engaged the congregation in small, mixed groups to discuss their reactions. The groups reported their feedback as the board listened and took notes. The board adjourned to reconvene with the congregation a week later. Here, they summarized what they heard and how they had incorporated the feedback into the final proposal. The proposal was put to a vote and received nearly unanimous support.
- A merger of two pharmaceutical firms with very different cultures and histories made it imperative that the scientists collaborate efficiently on new drug development efforts. A broad cross section of the two organizations came together in a half-day meeting to explore the steps in each other's development processes. Several rounds of small and large group discussion built a widely shared recognition of the benefits associated with greater understanding and collaboration across disciplines and steps in the process. Over the next several months, activities were initiated with broad support to improve communication, collaboration, and overall efficiency.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued for the adoption of a different way of meeting, one based on engaging participants, not managing their behavior or just hoping everyone will “meet nice.” As David Perkins argues in *King Arthur's Round Table*, good ideas often fall short of action if there are too many steps to recall, too much behavior to change. Instead he calls for some good action poetry: “The language of change needs not just explanation theories, or even action theories, but good action poetry – action theories that are built for action – simple memorable, and evocative.”⁵ For years I have used a simple statement from author and consultant Clay Carr as my “action poetry” for leading meetings: “We all do what makes sense to us in the situation. To change what I do, change what makes sense to me to do.” In planning and conducting meetings, keep in mind what is natural for us to do, and then choose structures that bring out the best of our natural behaviors for wiser conversations and decisions. What I call “High Engagement Meetings” provides just such a natural way to create more effective conversations and decisions making.

⁵ David Perkins, *King Arthur's Round Table: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organizations*, John Wiley, 2003, p. 213.

Comparing Assumptions

	Directed	Laissez-Faire	Engagement
Use of Agenda and Time	Meetings should use time efficiently, usually following a standard, set amount of time regardless of agenda. The meeting should follow an agenda with time planned to cover each topic, although the time may change in practice when disagreements arise.	Meeting length is determined by the time available, or maybe by the interest in the topic. Agendas evolve. Meetings naturally fill the time available.	There must be a clear task for the group to do together so that everyone knows how to contribute to the discussion and decisions. The agenda should allocate time to specific topics to be decided. Reports and presentations should be kept to a minimum to allow more time for people to talk with one another.
Participation	Participant roles in the meeting reflect levels of responsibility and authority. For example, it is natural for the person with greatest responsibility and authority to run the meeting and sit at the head of the table.	We assume that participants are all reasonable, well-intentioned people, who know how to have a conversation about what needs to be decided. Conversations will naturally lead to some back and forth between a few people while others sit back. Certain difficult topics should remain unspoken.	Complete understanding of an issue requires input from everyone with a stake in the issue. There should be a variety of opportunities for speaking and listening. Everyone in the meeting should have a genuine opportunity to contribute to decision making.
Discussion and Decision Making	Meetings should resolve key issues there and then. It is necessary, if unfortunate, that we have to spend time and energy in meetings trying to resolve disagreements but this is our opportunity to convince others; Areas of agreement will take care of themselves without discussion. The final decision is up to the leader or to a vote.	Conversation will focus on unresolved issues since if we can resolve these few areas of difference, everything else will fall into place. Decisions are usually reached by a presumption of consensus (as when we assume closure by saying “if no one has an objection...”) but we will vote if we get stuck.	Decisions should be reached through consensus, consent, or compromise. Voting should be used only as a last resort, if legally required, or for quick decisions on trivial items (e.g., “who wants pizza for lunch?”)
Outcomes	Meetings should produce outcomes that are implemented. Those present will communicate the meeting outcomes and follow-up as required.	Being better informed as a result of this conversation, participants will naturally know what to do next.	Participants should leave the meeting committed to following up on its conclusions.

Selected Books on Meetings, Conversations and Decision Making Organized by Behavioral/Structural Emphasis

Those with More of a Behavioral Emphasis:

Ellinor, Linda and Glenna Gerard. *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation*. New York: Wiley, 1998.

Kegan, Robert and Lisa Laskow Lahey. *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Isaacs, William. *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. NY: Currency, 1999.

Patterson, Kerry, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzer. *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*. NY: McGraw Hill, 2002.

Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York, Viking, 1999.

Those with a Mix of Behavioral and Structural Emphases:

Brown, Juanita, with David Isaacs. *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations that Matter*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005.

Doyle, Michael and David Straus. *How to Make Meetings Work*. New York: Jove, 1982.

Perkins, David. *King Arthur's Round Table: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organizations*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2003

Strauss, David. *How to Make Collaboration Work*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002.

Those with More of a Structural Emphasis:

Buck, John and Sharon Villines. *We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy*. Washington: Sociocracy.info, 2007.

Dannemiller Tyson Assoc. *Whole Scale Change: Unleashing the Magic in Organizations*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2000.

Emery, Merrelyn and Ronald Purser. *The Search Conference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

Susskind, Lawrence and Jeffrey Cruikshank. *Breaking Robert's Rules*. New York, Oxford, 2006.

Weisbord, Marvin, and Sandra Janoff. *Don't Just Do Something, Stand There! Ten Principles for Leading Meetings that Matter*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2007.

Weisbord, Marvin, and Sandra Janoff. *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations & Communities*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002.